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Defining Elements of The Mentor Teacher as A Professional

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Abstract

Teachers' professional development is a lifelong process. It begins with the pre-service training; it continues with the induction stage and it goes on with the continuous professional development. The induction period is extremely important for the beginning teacher; it is the necessary training for the future performance in the classroom. The role of the mentor at this stage is of utmost importance, as the future teacher's personality will be shaped by the mentor's competencies, roles, personal and professional qualities. The purpose of our research was to identify the main competencies that are necessary for a mentor for beginning teachers.

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1. Theoretical background

A mentor is a professional, an experienced person in his/her field of activity, a guide, a counselor who advises, encourages, guides, helps, creates professional opportunities, protects, gives feedback, supports a mentee so that the last one might become what he/she wishes. According to Noveanu and Potolea, the main characteristics of the efficient mentors are: they establish high standards; they are ready to invest time and effort in order to support other people's development; they create new situations in order to help the mentees' development; they are persons who

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are respected in their organizations (Noveanu & Potolea , 2007). Synthesizing the literature that refers to “mentoring”, Fullerton and Malderez suggest the following classification of the mentor’s roles: model, acculturator, sponsor, support, educator (apud Malderez& Bodoczky, 1999). Starting from the idea that mentors offer their mentees many advantages due to their experience, professional status, knowledge of the organization and influence, John identifies five mentor functions: 1) support, as the mentor may nominate his/her mentee for promotions; 2) visibility, as the mentor gives the mentee the possibility of working with important persons; 3) training and feedback, as the mentor suggests working strategies and identifies the mentee’s strong and weak points; 4) activities that are designed to develop the mentee’s professional capacity, as the mentor gives the mentee tasks that may help him/her develop key skills and knowledge that are useful for the development of his/ her career (Johns, 1998).

The initial teacher training has three fundamental elements: strong knowledge of the subject which is taught, knowledge of teaching and the training in teaching. The beginning of the teaching career may be a critical period for a university graduate. That is why the assistance offered by a mentor is needed at this point.

2. The structure of the research

Our research focused on two major objectives: a) to identify the subjects’ perception regarding the necessary areas of professional development for mentors; b) to identify the subjects’ perception regarding the overall competencies that a mentor for beginning teachers should have.

We started from the following hypothesis: taking into account the structural dynamic evolution in the field of professional qualification of the beginning teachers, we assume that there will appear specific ways of objectification of it at the level of the mentor’s professional profile.

3. The target group. Characteristics of the investigated population

We performed our research on 102 mentor teachers from Romania (74.5%- women, 25.5%- men). The structure of the investigated group in accordance with the seniority in teaching, at the moment of the research, was the following: 5.9% of the investigated subjects had been teachers for a period between 10 and 15 years; 24.5% of the investigated subjects had been teachers for a period between 15 and 20 years; 29.4% of the investigated subjects had been teachers for a period between 20 and 25 years; 40.2% of the investigated subjects had been teachers for more than 25 years. We notice that the idea of mentoring is associated with the idea of experience in teaching.

4. Methods of research

We created a questionnaire which was administered to the mentor teachers (Cronbach’s alpha internal consistency .852).

5. Findings of the research

5.1 Investigation of the subjects’ professional experience

80.4% of the investigated subjects answered that they wanted to become mentors for the beginning teachers in order to increase their professional status. We may understand that the social position is of utmost importance for the investigated subjects.

All the investigated subjects completed a mentoring training course. They considered that the most important fields of study for mentors are: effective communication (68.9% of the investigated subjects consider it as very important), the specific subject that the mentor as a teacher teaches (67.8% of the investigated subjects consider it as very important), methodology (64.4% of the investigated subjects consider it as very important), career counselling (62.2% of the investigated subjects consider it as very important), use of the new technologies (57.8% of the investigated subjects consider it as very important). Beside these, the investigate subjects, consider that a mentoring training course for teachers should also include courses such as: adult psycho- pedagogy, school management, active listening skills. 42.6% of investigated subjects consider that the practical knowledge acquired during the training

course is very important. The most frequent practical activities contained by the training courses completed by the investigated subjects included: observing the activity of the other mentor teachers (85.3%), working with a beginning teacher under the supervision of a mentor (80%), creating instruments that are to be used in the mentoring activity, such as: working sheets, lesson plans, designing mentoring activities, observation sheet, assessment grids (66.7%).

5.2 Investigation of the subjects' professional expertise

We investigated the importance that the subjects give to the professional competencies that a mentor should have. Thus, the most important competencies in their opinion are the subject, didactic and methodological competencies (95.1% of the investigated subjects considered them very important). Other important competencies considered by the subjects as being very important are: the social and relational competencies (80.4% of the investigated subjects considered them very important), competencies in evaluating the beginning teachers' activity (79.4% of the investigated subjects considered them very important), competencies in monitoring the beginning teachers' activity (78.5% of the investigated subjects considered them very important), competencies in planning and organizing the mentoring activity (78.4% of the investigated subjects considered them very important).

The investigated subjects' preference for the subject, didactic and methodological competencies as being the most important ones may be explained by the idea that mentors function as role models for the beginning teachers in their professional life; they share skills, knowledge and expertise, and they assume a great responsibility: to show the beginning teachers how everything works on the teaching stage. Therefore, it is obvious that only teachers who possess these competencies at the highest level in their everyday activities may become good mentors. More than this, the mentors should have didactic and methodological competencies not only in working with pupils, but also in working with adults. Mentors should have very good knowledge about the specifics of adults' learning in order to be able to develop a suitable professional relationship with the beginning teachers.

The social and relational competencies are essential, as the process of communication implies the transfer of information from a transmitter to a receiver. Hence, mentors should possess communication skills in order to be able to guide, motivate and offer constructive feedback to the beginning teachers. The mentors' communication style plays an important role, too, as it may encourage or, on the contrary, it may block the beginning teachers to communicate or even to think or act during the mentoring process.

The competencies in evaluating the beginning teachers' activity are necessary for the mentors as they have to determine to which extend the objectives from the action plan have been accomplished at a certain point or at the end of the mentoring process, they have to permanently revise the mentoring activity in order to welcome the beginning teachers' needs and to optimise the beginning teachers' process of learning. The mentors should also be able to encourage the beginning teachers' self evaluation as a specific form of reflection on the teaching activity.

The mentors should have competencies in monitoring the beginning teachers' activity as they are supposed to supervise the mentoring activity in order to ensure that they are on schedule in meeting the objectives that have been established.

The competencies in planning and organizing the mentoring activity are important, as the mentors plan, organize and coordinate the mentoring activity in order to achieve the established objectives. The mentors identify and analyse the beginning teacher's needs, and then establish with them an individual action plan. The mentors also establish the content of each mentoring session in accordance with the objectives from the individual action plan; the mentors decide which methods and strategies are the most suitable for the each learning situation. From this point of view, the mentors should think of a large choice of activities that may help the development of the beginning teachers' career. This means not only observing lessons and discussions, but also taking part in methodological activities, facilitating the access of the beginning teachers to the school as an organization and to the community of teachers.

It is interesting to notice that the set of competencies considered by the investigated subjects as being the most important ones cover the entire mentoring process: the subject, didactic and methodological competencies, the competencies in monitoring the beginning teacher's activity and the social and relational competencies manifest themselves during the entire mentoring process; the competencies in planning and organizing the mentoring activity manifest themselves at the beginning of the mentoring process, while the competencies in evaluating the beginning teacher's activity manifest themselves both at the end of the mentoring process and during it.

We also notice that the most important competencies considered by the investigated subjects are in direct relation

with the most important fields of study indicated by them as being the most important: effective communication and career counselling are related to social and relational competencies; the specific subject that the mentor as a teacher teaches and methodology are related to didactic and methodological competencies; the use of the new technologies is related to didactic and methodological competencies, but it may also be related to the other competencies, too.

Another observation is that the set of competencies stressed by the investigated subjects are closely related to two connected professions: the train of trainers and the coach. This means that the mentor for the beginning teachers represents a complex structure, which means that he/she should be not only a great teacher, but he/she should also be able to include in his/ her mentoring activity specific elements from the areas of coaching and train of trainers, depending on the specific situations that may appear during the mentoring process.

The statistical analysis revealed significant direct correlations between: competencies in monitoring the beginning teachers' activity and competencies in planning and organizing the mentoring activity ($r=.775$, $p=.0.5$), competencies in monitoring the beginning teachers' activity and competencies in counselling the beginner teachers' career ($r=.731$, $p=.0.01$), competencies in monitoring the beginning teachers' activity and competencies in conflict management ($r=.894$, $p=.0.05$), competencies in evaluating the mentoring activity and social and relational competencies ($r=.745$, $p=.0.01$), competencies in evaluating the mentoring activity and competencies in evaluating the beginning teacher's activity ($r=.745$, $p=.0.01$), competencies in planning and organizing the mentoring activity and competencies in identifying the beginner teachers' needs ($r=.775$, $p=.0.01$).

We investigated the subjects' opinion regarding the necessary training for a mentor for beginning teachers. 54.8% of the investigated subjects considered that mentors need to complete a mentoring training course, 20.6% of the investigated subjects considered that mentors need a master degree in mentoring, 15.7% of the investigated subjects considered that mentors need university studies in the subject that they teach, while 8.8% of the investigated subjects considered that mentors need a master degree in the subject that they teach. It is important to stress the idea that none of the subjects considered that mentors need no training. This fact shows the awareness that the investigated subjects have of the high responsibility that a mentor assumes.

6. Conclusions

The collected data lead to the following conclusions: mentoring represent an opportunity for experienced teachers to increase their professional status; in order to become mentors, teachers should complete specific training courses; the most important fields of study that a training course for mentors should include are: effective communication, the specific subject that the mentor as a teacher teaches, methodology, career counselling, use of the new technologies, adult psycho- pedagogy, school management, active listening skills; a mentoring training course should contain more practical activities than theoretical activities; a mentor teacher should develop at the highest level mainly the following competencies: subject, didactic and methodological competencies, social and relational competencies, competencies in evaluating the beginner teachers' activity, competencies in monitoring the beginner teachers' activity, competencies in planning, organizing and analysing the mentoring activity.

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